

True Freedom
Romans 6:12-23
July 6, 2008
Kory Wilcoxson

I was thinking the other day about the holiday we just celebrated. It's commonly called "the Fourth of July," because as luck would have it, that's the date it falls on every year. I wish Easter was that easy! But it's more formal name is "Independence Day."

Think about that word "independence." It's actually a negative word. Let's play amateur lexicographer for a moment. The prefix "in-" means "not." "Incredible" means "not believable," "incessant" means "not stopping," and "inhale" means "to not hale." OK, I'm not so sure about that last one.

So if you carry this line of thinking on out, Independence Day celebrates the fact we are not dependent on something. What is that? What do we have freedom from? We are celebrating that we're no longer dependent on the monarchy of England and that we no longer are subject to taxation without representation. We are free from oppression, from tyranny, and from calling our bathrooms the "loo".

The 4th of July celebrates the things which we are free from doing. We know what we're free from, but what are we free for? I'm sure if you were impressed by my use of the word "lexicographer," you're now secretly making fun of me for my bad grammar, but you get the idea. What does this freedom we celebrate give us the power to do? And how are we to use this freedom for the greater good, how can we give back from what we've received?

These are exactly the kinds of questions Paul is dealing with in this part of his letter to the Romans. He's spent the first six and a half chapters defining this gift they've received through Christ and how they are now free from both the grip of sin and the control of the law. After Paul's explanation, the Romans know what they are free from.

Now, in the section we read, he's beginning to address what they are free for. I have a feeling there were some folks in the Roman church who were maybe getting the wrong idea about this freedom. Paul goes to great lengths to say, "Because Christ died for you, you no longer have to worry about being punished for your sins." Of course, the initial reaction would be, "Woo hoo! I can do whatever I want now, because I know that God will forgive me for it. I'm gonna live a life of wild Saturdays and worshipful Sundays."

Paul asks, "Shall we sin because we're not under the law but under grace? By no means!" Yes, we are free from the penalty of sin, but that freedom was bought with a price, and carries with it some responsibility on our part. If we think that Christ's death on the cross gives us *carte blanche* to live the high life because we know in the end we'll be let off the hook, then we've severely missed the point. We're not only free from something; we're free for something.

Paul tries to explain this using the analogy of slavery. That might have worked when he was writing this letter, but things have happened in the subsequent 2000 years that have made this comparison less than helpful. "Slavery" is one of those words that carries with it such emotional baggage that we may have a hard time hearing what Paul is trying to tell us.

In Paul's time, slavery was much different than we might think. Slaves were not always forced into their work, although some were. More often than not, people voluntarily became slaves as a way of securing basic necessities for living. A slave would be given housing and meals and some kind of pay, which was often much better than what the person had trying to make it on their own. In exchange for what they received, slaves were expected to give 100 percent devotion to their employers. This was not a 9-to-5 job. Their service was their lives.

Paul uses that understanding of slavery to make his point about sin and righteousness. He says before Christ we were slaves to our sin, meaning there was no aspect of our lives that was free from sin's dominion. But through Christ, we have been freed from sin's rule in our lives and no longer have to answer to that master. Before, we were slaves to sin and free from righteousness; now, it's the other way around, and we are free from sin. But, to finish out that juxtaposition, we are free from sin and we are slaves to righteousness. In Paul's analogy, we are still slaves, but we've moved from one realm to another.

My grandmother just adopted a dog, a schnauzer she's named Charlie. When she got Charlie from the animal shelter, his fur was all matted and he was in bad physical shape. It was obvious his previous owner did not take good care of him. Now, after just a few weeks with my grandma, Charlie is neatly groomed and very well fed, sort of like how I feel after I visit my grandma. He's moved from one realm, where he was mistreated, to another realm, where he is well cared for.

Does this mean that at my grandmother's house Charlie sits on the dinner table and hogs the remote control? Of course not! There are still rules to follow and standards to uphold. But now, instead of doing things out of fear of punishment, Charlie does things out of a response to the love he receives. At least I think that's why he does it. He hasn't actually told me that.

We are no longer slaves to sin, but we are still slaves. We are free from serving sin, but we are also free for serving righteousness. While Charlie is free from his old life, he's not free to do whatever he pleases. In this country, we're free from England's rule, but there are still laws to follow and responsibilities to uphold, like voting and obeying traffic signals.

I think what Paul is worried about is that the Romans will take their new freedom to mean that the hard work is over. They can just sit back and let the freedom of Christ wash over them. But Paul is saying getting up off the couch, because you still have work to do. Sin is constantly pursuing us, and we have to be vigilant about using all our resources – including our bodies – for the work of the Lord and not the work of sin. St. Jerome, an early Christian mystic, wrote that he thought by fleeing to the desert he could leave behind the temptation the dancing girls of Rome. But he found that even in the desert he had a problem with the dancing girls of Rome. The temptation to sin will never leave us, so we must be about God's business in our lives.

What Paul is saying to the Romans and to us is that we have a choice. There's a lot in our lives over which we have no power, but that includes the fact that as Christians, we have no power over whether or not we are loved and forgiven. Through Christ, that's already happened. What we do have power over is whether we live like that's happened.

That's why Paul says, "Do not offer parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness." Paul's choice of Greek words here refers specifically to sexual sins, but in

reality all of our bodies can be used for sin. Our mouth can gossip, our eyes can roll, our hands can clench into fists, and our feet can walk us away from a situation where help is needed.

That's our choice. That's what we have power over. That's what we've been given the freedom for: to choose to live as servants of righteousness. Now, I know no one is perfect, and I know we all still slip up, but that's not an excuse to stop trying, because the sin in our lives will never stop trying to drag us down. We get to choose how we use our mouths, our eyes, our hands, our feet. We have the choice of making ourselves weapons in the hands of God or weapons in the hand of sin, and each decision we make contributes to this.

Paul writes elsewhere in Romans that we all fall short of God's glory, and he's right. We are in a divine-human partnership, and I have to tell you that we don't always carry our share of the load. But God doesn't give up on us. For some crazy reason, God keeps hoping that we might choose to be a little better today than we were yesterday. We don't always give God a reason to believe that, but God believes it anyway, so much so that God sent us Jesus to show us the magnitude and depth of God's hope in us.

The dancing girls – or men – of Rome will always be with us. The temptation to sin may change form and color, but it will never go away. What Paul is saying is that we no longer have to answer to that master nor suffer the consequences of our own fallibility. While we can't earn our salvation – Christ already took care of that – we can live in such a way that's a response to God's grace. We are no longer motivated by the fear of what God will do to us, but by the inspiration of what God has done for us.

Will we ever reach perfection? Not even Charlie the dog has a chance at that. But I would like to believe God is less concerned about what stage we've reached than what direction we're facing. I pray we can keep our eyes on the gift and glory of Jesus Christ, and live our lives in that way. After all, that's what we've been given the freedom to do.